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By TERRY BURT
Of the Tribune staff

Caught off-guard.
They were outmanned.
They were outgunned.
They fought for their lives.
And they won what was called the greatest U.S. military victory in history.

HARNISH: "In trouble."
WOJAHN: "Unbelievable."
WITTENBERG: Sitting ducks.
BESL: Captured Dec. 22.

HEADING TO WAR: Infantrymen of the U.S. First Army advance through Belgium's Ardennes Forest at the start of the Battle of the Bulge in December 1944.

Alfred "Babe" Harnish knew he was in for a bad-evil of a time when he saw an U.S. Army chaplain carrying a rifle.

"When I saw this chaplain with an M-1 strapped across his back, I knew we were in trouble," said Harnish, one of several La Crosse area men who fought 50 years ago in the Battle of the Bulge, the Nazi Judge with the battered 106th Infantry Division, of which more than half were killed, captured or taken prisoner.

The death blow to the 106th's 422nd Infantry Regiment was delivered by the 1st SS Panzer and the Fuehrer Begleit Brigade, according to historian-author Peter Elstob in his book "Hitler's Last Offensive."

The German armor "rolled through the American infantry who were without anti-tank weapons or ammunition for their bazookas," Elstob wrote.

At the same time, German volksgrenadiers (people's infantry replacement soldiers) attacked from both sides.

Only about 150 men of the 422nd succeeded in regaining the American lines.

The 423rd's sister regiment, the 424rd, suffered even more battle casualties, losing some 300 men.

Ammunition had almost run out, and there were no supporting weapons. They, too, surrendered to the Nazis.

The 106th's 424th Regiment put up a stout defense in its own sector and was the only surviving regiment from the ill-fated division.

"We were called up to help out the 422nd until the 101st Airborne Division, commanded by Brigadier General Anthony McAuliffe, arrived," said Wojahn, a combat engineer. "At most, we had a few grenades and 44 rounds (of rifle ammunition) per man."

Wojahn was captured Dec. 18, his 22nd birthday, after his unit was cut off.

By Dec. 19th, the whole dazed German army was ahead of us," he said. "It was unbelievable how many Germans were there."

The U.S. regimental commander gave orders to the company commanders to surrender, said Harnish, of the 424th Regiment, "to prevent the loss of life."

"We were in trouble," Wittenberg, an artilleryman in the division, recalls how he and others tried to reach safety, but without a compass they were hopelessly lost.

One U.S. officer they came across had a compass but wouldn't share it with us," he said.

"We should have taken it from him," Wittenberg said.

However, Wittenberg hung on with an infantry unit for a few more days and was finally captured on Dec. 22.

Most of the heavy U.S. casualties were a result of German artillery.

"I never saw so many 88s (German 88mm guns) in my life," said Wittenberg. "The shrapnel was just flying."

The following day, Dec. 22, Gerald "Gerry" Besl of La Crosse and other members of 422nd Infantry also was captured.

Some former members of the 106th Division felt their units were "sacrificed" early in the battle. Their three regiments covered a 20-mile front, an area that would be later covered by four or five divisions.

"I thought the officers were kind of lax," Wittenberg said. "They didn't know where to go or what to do."

"We were going to counterattack when they (Germans) caught us in open ground," said Harnish, who was a sergeant. Harnish said, "I think they (Allied High Command) opened up the gates (to the Germans) to shorten the war."

"I always thought we were sitting ducks," Wittenberg said.

Wojahn said he felt sorry for Americans at surrounded Bastogne because they were fighting from a fixed position and had some cover.

"When they moved us, we were done," he said.

Harnish threw away his heavy overcoat during the movement, he said, and later wished he had kept it. He would sleep in the snow and in cold prisoner camps with only a field jacket.

"I thought of that coat a lot," he said. "But at the time I figured what do I need a coat for if I'm dead?"

Harnish hates to hear the typical military excuses for the destruction of the 106th. Those explanations usually contain the words "green" or "untested."

"We had lots of training," he said. "We were as good as anybody else. They (military leaders) used those excuses because of the position they put us in."

The 106th arrived in the Ardennes ahead Dec. 16 as replacements for the combat-hardened 2nd Infantry Division.

"We looked like orphans compared to the 2nd," Wittenberg recalled. "They had cold weather clothing and overshoes. We didn't. It didn't look like we were from the same country."

THE BATTLE

■ **WHERE:** Ardennes Region of Eastern Belgium and Northern Luxembourg

■ **WHO:** More than 1 million men, including 600,000 Americans, 500,000 Germans and 55,000 British.

■ **WHEN:** Dec. 16, 1944 to Jan. 24, 1945.

■ **WHY:** Six months after the D-Day landings and forced eastward by the advancing Western Allies, the Nazis launched a huge counteroffensive that Hitler hoped would drive through the Americans and reach the port city of Antwerp.

■ **RESULT:** The Germans failed in their breakthrough and used up their precious reserves of men and equipment. Within two weeks, the Americans stopped the German advance near the Meuse River in Belgium. The Ardennes offensive is known as the Battle of the Bulge because of the bulging shape of the battleground on a map.

■ **CASUALTIES** (killed, wounded, captured or missing): Germans 100,000; U.S. 81,000 including 19,000 killed.

CASUALTIES OF WAR: The frozen bodies of German soldiers lie the snow of a Belgian road during the Battle of the Bulge.

THEIR WORDS

■ **DEFIANT:** "Nuts," replied U.S. Army Brigadier Gen. Anthony McAuliffe to the German demand for the surrender of McAuliffe's 101st Airborne Division at besieged Bastogne. McAuliffe and his Screaming Eagles fought in a latter-day Alamo with a happier ending.

■ **HISTORIC:** The Battle of the Bulge was the largest American engagement in World War II and it sealed the fate of the German army. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill called it "the greatest American battle of the war and an ever famous American victory."

■ **CHAOS:** In the confusion, a soldier "could become a hero by running in any direction. They thought you were leading a charge," Albert "Babe" Harnish of La Crosse.

ON B-5: Luther Freng went to war as a medic. He ended it as a prisoner of war.

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